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When your spouse has a stroke

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„When your spouse has a Stroke“

by Sara Palmer, PhD and Jeffrey B. Palmer, MD
Johns Hopkins Press, 2011, 206 pages

Stroke can be a life-time event and its consequences a major burden for the survivor and her or his spouse. In their monograph „When your spouse has a stroke“ Sara and Jeffrey Palmer provide insights and guidelines for spouses who's partner had a stroke and lives with its consequences.

In fulfilling this objective the book is unique and clearly needed by many families of stroke survivors. Although not all sufferers of a stroke remain disabled, between 50% to 80% of individuals are left with deficits that impact the conduct of their daily lives. When a stroke survivor returns home after inpatient rehabilitation (and most do so), the spouse is the first and often the only caregiver on a daily basis. This can be a substantial burden. The authors are right to emphasize in the prologue that only a healthy spouse can be a good caregiver. The health of the spouse and the stroke survivor closely interact. In six chapters, the book covers sources of social support, finding a balance between the caregiver role and other duties, sexuality and romance after stroke, benefits and support for a caregiving spouse, issues that impact the marriage after the partner's stroke, and, finally, stroke prevention and decisions that need to be taken when approaching the end of the partner's life. By interposing short stories serving as real-live examples, problems and their solutions become concrete and easy to understand. Practical tips at the end of each chapter summarize the recommendations and guidelines.

When a spouse gets eaten up by caregiving, which impacts her or his health it is important to realize the caregiver's rights – summarized in a „Caregiver's Bill of Rights“ (page 110).

Without diminishing my enthusiasm about this book, some aspects of post-stroke life that are mentioned in exemplary short stories, warrant more emphasis. One is prognostication and the hope it raises or destroys (e.g. page 44). Acute care physicians tend to underestimate the brain's potential for recovery. This destroys the initiative and motivation of the survivor and the family to train and fight for recovery. On the other hand, raising unrealistic hope is equally counter-productive. Stroke survivors need the motivation for often labour intense rehabilitation training. Spouses can do a lot to stimulate motivation. Finally, problems after stroke can occur in the absence of overt physical disability. While the stroke survivor may seem neurologically normal, (neuro-)psychological or emotional deficits may occur that will require intense care and empathy.

The book provides psychological, social and medical recommendations that help to solve many of the problems that couples face after one partner had a stroke. Although focused on the United States, the information is equally applicable to European societies. The book contains 10 pages of contact information of support groups and service providers – these are of course useful but only applicable to North America.

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